

City of Takoma Park, Maryland

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Suzanne Ludlow, City Manager

January 8, 2018

Dr. Jack R. Smith, PhD
Superintendent
Montgomery County Public Schools
850 Hungerford Drive
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Superintendent Smith,

I am writing to express deep concern about the process followed by the Downcounty Consortium Elementary School Site Selection Advisory Committee (SSAC), and the resulting possible negative consequences for the residents and future students of the City of Takoma Park.

The Takoma Park City Council has been on recess over the holidays and their first meeting will be this Wednesday. I will be briefing them at that meeting on the status of this effort. From my informal discussions with Councilmembers to date, I expect that the Council will strongly advocate for the process to be reopened.

As you are aware, the schools in Takoma Park are overcrowded and there is limited capacity at the elementary schools for expansion. I believe we all agree it is appropriate that the potential for adding a new elementary school in the area be examined before a major expansion effort be undertaken at Piney Branch Elementary School.

Unfortunately, the MCPS staff did not use demographic or land use information that would provide a fair evaluation of the options or costs. And, because the process took place during the holiday season and was hurried, even the problems with the approach could not be easily addressed.

I did have a senior City of Takoma Park staff member participate in the SSAC. I know that she raised issues about the information provided, but few changes were made.

Here are the problems:

1. No information was presented on where the students live that would be attending elementary school in the coming years. Instead, the only information was on the number of students attending the various schools and the capacity of those schools. Without the residential location information, a new elementary school could be built far from where a large number of new students are living, resulting in very disruptive redistricting process and the need to bus many children.
2. The list of possible sites was not vetted with County agencies before being presented to the SSAC. Sites presented to the Committee included properties with already-approved development plans and those that County agencies would oppose for use for development (such as parks).
3. Some of the sites presented were ones to which almost no child could walk. These are unsuitable as elementary schools sites.
4. Many of the sites presented would remove parkland from our densely-populated neighborhoods. Apparently these were considered because it was believed that there would not be a purchase price for County-owned land, but the cost to the community in losing parkland needs to be weighed. And, some parkland is protected from development; if development were eventually approved, other property may need to be purchased and turned into parkland to make up for the loss.
5. No cost criteria were included for parkland loss and restoration, environmental issues, or increased bus transportation. There was no discussion of the cost of adapting or demolishing existing structures. These various factors could not be weighed by the Committee when assessing the sites.
6. The process of considering privately-owned property was unclear. While it is understandable that consideration of privately-owned sites is sensitive, such sites may be more cost-effective. And, redevelopment of such sites may help advance other community goals as well.

More than half of the boundary of the City of Takoma Park abuts Washington, D.C. or Prince George's County. New students in Takoma Park must be served by a school in or near Takoma Park or many students will need to be bused. This is a problem for families and a long-term expense for MCPS. No consideration of this issue was discussed by the Committee.

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There are at least three privately-owned sites in Takoma Park that may be suitable as school sites. Two of these sites have former school buildings on them. The process of evaluating these sites remains unclear. Use of one of these sites could result in long-term operating cost savings to MCPS by minimizing busing and in shorter-term construction cost savings by minimizing changes to other schools to address needs related to large-scale redistricting.

Instead, the flawed rating criteria of schools sites by the SSAC resulted in the recommendation of sites three miles from the eastern side of Takoma Park where we expect residential population to increase. Because of the County boundary, redistricting would have a domino effect north and west from Takoma Park, harming many students inside of the Beltway.

No information was provided by the Committee about their ratings of the private school sites. Clear information about how these sites are being considered needs to be shared.

I wanted to give you a head's up that this site selection process is likely to become quite controversial as the public becomes aware of it. There may be steps you can take now to assess and correct the process. Such a correction would start with obtaining and reviewing base information on where the students live and the feasibility of the public and private sites that were under consideration.

In any event, I will ask the Takoma Park representative on the SSAC, Rosalind Grigsby, to prepare a Minority Report on the Committee's recommendations and will be briefing the Takoma Park City Council this Wednesday on the process.

Please feel free to contact me at 301-891-7229 (desk) or 240-687-4119 (cell) or by email at SuzanneL@takomaparkmd.gov.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



Suzanne R. Ludlow
City Manager
City of Takoma Park

cc: Takoma Park City Council